

In brief

FDA backs Herceptin: The US Food and Drug Administration says that despite the recent findings that Genentech's breast cancer drug Herceptin (trastuzumab) was linked to the deaths of 15 patients and 47 adverse reactions, the drug's benefits still outweigh its risks.

Mobile phones might pose risk to children: The UK government is to commission research into the safety of mobile phones after a report warned that they might pose a risk to children. The report, by an expert group chaired by Sir William Stewart, found no evidence that the phones were harmful but recommended stricter planning controls for masts and new guidelines for emissions. It is available at www.iegmp.org.uk

WHO warns of health disaster in Sri Lanka: The World Health Organization has warned that in war torn, northern Sri Lanka both government and voluntary health services are severely threatened. They are no longer able to provide services owing to a lack of medical supplies, including basic drugs and vaccines for children.

Pet reptiles cause babies' deaths: Two babies in England have died this year from salmonellosis after contact with pet reptiles. Ninety per cent of exotic reptile pets carry salmonella, and in the most recent incident *Salmonella poona* was identified in brain tissue from a 4 month old baby and an iguana owned by the baby's grandmother.

Samaritans want to reduce self harm in young people: The Samaritans, the UK charity that provides confidential support to people in crisis, has called for more information to be available in hospitals and schools to tackle the rise in self harm among young people.

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News extra

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Controversy over new editor at *New England Journal of Medicine*

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

The Massachusetts Medical Society has named a Boston pulmonary specialist as the new editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, opening a new chapter in a struggle over the journal's control that began more than a year ago with the departure of the journal's long standing editor Dr Jerome Kassirer.

Dr Jeffrey Drazen, aged 53, who carries out research into asthma at Brigham and Women's Hospital, is expected to take the helm of the medical journal this summer. Dr Drazen has led the pulmonary division at Brigham and Women's Hospital since 1989 and has had 200 original research articles and 100 review articles published in medical journals since 1972.

Dr Kassirer, the journal's editor in chief for eight years, was asked to step down last May because of his opposition to plans by the Massachusetts Medical Society, which publishes the journal, to launch a family of consumer oriented and specialty specific medical journals.

Dr Kassirer had already roused the medical society's ire by resisting earlier attempts to use the journal's name to sell its newer publications, including two consumer newsletters, as well as several publications written for doctors.

Dr Marcia Angell, the journal's executive editor—who suc-

ceeded Dr Kassirer as interim editor in chief and was a finalist for the permanent post—with-drew recently as a candidate and said that she was retiring to write a book on alternative medicine.

Dr Drazen is stepping into the job at a time when many issues about the journal's future remain unresolved. The most prominent is how much control the next editor will maintain over the journal's content, editorial policy, and brand name—an issue that led to the departure of Dr Kassirer. Dr Angell took the job only after the Massachusetts Medical Society agreed last year to give her total authority over

the content, name, and logo of the journal in print and in its electronic version.

One of the first issues Dr Drazen has confronted is controversy over his close ties with a number of pharmaceutical companies that have funded his pulmonary research and hired him as a consultant. Under the *New England Journal of Medicine's* conflict of interest rules, he is barred from writing editorials or review articles relating to his research or related work within two years of accepting commercial funding.

The controversy over editorial independence at the journal partly surrounded the Massachusetts Medical Society's efforts to advertise its other publications for doctors and the public by saying that the publishers of the *New England Journal of Medicine* produce them. □



Dr Drazen opens a new chapter in *NEJM's* history

Surgeon dies from hospital exposure to asbestos

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

The family of a consultant plastic surgeon who died of mesothelioma at age 47 had a settlement of £1.15m (\$1.8m) from Camden and Islington Health Authority approved by the High Court in London last week.

The health authority accepted that James Emerson, a consultant at the Royal Northern

Hospital in Sheffield, contracted the illness as a result of exposure to blue asbestos dust from damaged pipe lagging in tunnels under the Middlesex Hospital in London, where he was a medical student from 1966 to 1970 and a junior doctor in 1972-3.

Documents disclosed, and witness statements confirmed, that hospital buildings, including the main hospital and the medical school, were linked by underground tunnels which carried an extensive network of pipes and cables, and were routinely used by staff and students to travel between buildings.

Mr Emerson remembered

that he passed through the tunnels several times a day. An article in the *Guardian* newspaper in 1977 stated that parts of the hospital had been closed down "and the stores kept there removed and decontaminated, because of the presence of blue asbestos in pipe lagging."

Witnesses confirmed that lagging had been damaged by impact from hospital trolleys and was in a poor state of repair in places.

Mr Emerson died in 1995 leaving a wife and three daughters, now aged between 10 and 17. Shortly before the case was due to go to trial in November 1998, the health authority admitted liability. □